

SARDAR SEWA SINGH THIKRIWALA



PUNJABI UNIVERSITY, PATIALA

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A BRIEF SKETCH OF HIS LIFE AND WORK

GURBACHAN SINGH TALIB



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Panjabi University, Patiala

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FOREWORD

This is the brief life-sketch of a simple, heroic man, who struggled like so many others in our country against the dark forces of despotism and tyranny. Anyone with even a cursory knowledge of the state of affairs in the Indian Princely States would know what centres of tyranny they were, with the absolute immunity which their rulers enjoyed under protection of British bayonets. By currying favour with the foreign imperialism which held India under sway, they absolutely rode rough-shod over the human rights of their subjects. There was hardly any rule of law in these States, where the will of the ruler alone constituted law and justice. The officialdom being entirely at the mercy of the ruler's whim, the subject could not hope for fair consideration of his rights or in case of conflict, for a fair trial. Now-a-days we are used to looking upon certain constitutional rights as axiomatic. No such thing existed in the Indian States. Men had to struggle with their blood for elementary human justice. It is in this background that the story of Sardar Sewa Singh's deeply touching struggle has to be read. Of course, there were numerous others in other Indian States who had to undergo trials similar to his.

The Maharaja of Patiala, Bhupendra Singh whose will Sardar Sewa Singh was charged with defying, was a brilliant, colourful and highly resourceful prince. With a slightly different, publicly-minded slant he would have proved with his gifts, a great ruler. But

sheer arrogance and despotic mania led him on to the path of sadistic cruelty, which Sardar Sewa Singh withstood with lofty patience in the spirit of the true Sikh and Satyagrahi. The more we look at the conflict of this pair the more are we struck with its tragedy, on its needless waste of so much good human material. With each of these episodes narrated in this booklet, our respect for Sardar Sewa Singh rises. It is hoped that this brief story of an unknown heroic man will serve to fill up a blank in the history of our peoples' freedom struggle.

This sketch in English is based on the detailed and well-documented narrative done in Panjabi by Principal Gurcharan Singh of Faridkot. Both the original and this sketch owe their inspiration to the Panjabi University of Patiala.

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BACKGROUND TO HIS PERSONALITY—RELIGIOUS AND POLITICAL

Sardar Sewa Singh Thikriwala was a distinguished servant of the people, and a fearless hero, who made the supreme sacrifice in the cause of the people and the land. His steadfastness in the path of self-sacrifice brings to mind the great Sikh heroes of the eighteenth century who stood up to the tyranny and terror of the rulers of those times; and unmindful of the most brutal tortures inflicted on them, gave away their lives with equanimity and calm serenity. In order properly to understand the full significance of his sacrifice, a brief narrative of the conditions obtaining in the Panjab in and after the first quarter of the twentieth century will be necessary.

Within three decades of the British occupation of the Panjab in 1849, several movements for religious and social reform arose within its boundaries. The Panjab Hindus at this time felt the impact of the Arya Samaj, while within the Sikh fold arose notably the Singh Sabha and the Namdhari movements, besides the Chief Khalsa Diwan, which was a Sikh religio-political organisation with a 'moderate' programme. Of the Sikh movements, the most remarkable in its influence proved to be that known as the Singh Sabha already mentioned.

This movement aimed at the regeneration of the Sikh people through re-inspiring them with the religious fervour and rescuing them from that state of moral and religious torpor into which they had fallen in the wake of the end of Sikh rule over the Panjab. There had come about a visible fall in the quality of the Sikh priesthood. Places of Sikh worship (Gurdwaras) instead of being the sources where-from spiritual and moral influence might generate, had degenerated into the personal estates of hereditary priests (*Pujaris* and *Mahants*), a number of whom had acquired an unsavoury reputation. The Singh Sabha Movement, by its passionate call to the Sikhs to restore its true character to their faith, helped a great deal to restore religious fervour and to remove the moral and spiritual lassitude among them. The entire body of the Sikh people felt the impact of this great Movement, which gave the impulse towards a fresh interpretation of religion and led to far-reaching reforms in the social code. It was as a consequence of this Movement that fresh educational effort was initiated among the Sikhs, symbolized by the founding of the Khalsa College at Amritsar (1892) and a chain of Khalsa (Sikh) schools.

In the wake of the fervour aroused by the Singh Sabha Movement, rose also the Chief Khalsa Dewan and the Panch Khalsa Dewan. The former aimed at providing the Sikhs with a political platform, while the latter was a sternly purist movement in religion. These and other movements of this nature provided the inspiration for a new religious and reform-oriented body of writing among the Sikhs in Panjabi, written in the Gurmukhi

character which in subsequent years has acquired such influence and importance. All these influences combined to create what it would not be inappropriate to call the spirit of a renaissance among the Sikhs, which is an integral aspect of the general renaissance experienced by the Indian people as a whole during the later nineteenth and the earlier twentieth centuries.

Besides these movements of an essentially peaceful character, appeared among the Sikhs certain movements of a militant nature, which have left a powerful impact on their subsequent history. Of these the prominent ones are those associated with the steamer *Kamagata Maru* and with the *Ghadar* (Revolt) Movement. These too were in several ways inter-related. The episode of the steamer *Kamagata Maru*, in 1914 became the symbol of the utter helplessness of the Indian people as a subject-race within the British Empire, to whom the White Dominions of Britain would not accord the most ordinary citizenship rights. This episode is a saga of heroism and endurance by a number of Indian, mostly Sikh, emigrants to Canada, who were pushed back from Vancouver; made to suffer heavy financial losses and on their forced return to India, hounded down and severely persecuted. A number were hanged or deported. The *Ghadar* movement had international overtones, and was an organisation of patriotic Indians, again mostly Sikhs. It included also among its leaders some non-Sikhs with brilliant minds. It aimed, in the background of the First World War, to strike at the British rule in India and to liberate the country through an armed

insurrection. The resources of the revolutionaries being small and a number of police agents sneaking into their ranks—these factors made this splendidly conceived movement a failure. There were vast conspiracy trials, preceded by battles between the revolutionaries and the police at various places in the Panjab countryside. There was a large crop of death-sentences and deportations. While this Movement failed, it leavened the Sikh people as a whole with patriotic fervour, who from a reputedly 'loyal' group were turned into stern opponents of the British rule in India. The consequences of this development were to colour the history of the Sikhs during the next three decades, till the dawn of Indian freedom.

Around this time another episode, deeply touching to the Sikh religious sentiment occurred in Delhi. After the proclamation to make Delhi the Capital of India, New Delhi town was planned. The land of a sacred Sikh Shrine known as Rikab Ganj was sought to be encroached upon in order to fit into the plan of the new Capital. There was a serious agitation among the Sikhs forcing the Government to drop that part of the scheme touching the Gurdwara.

The Sikhs felt the impact, like the rest of the Indian Public, of the mass murder of Jallianwala Bagh, which took place in 1919 in Amritsar, sacred to the Sikhs, within virtually a stone-throw of their famous Golden Temple. By 1920 the Sikhs, till then 'loyal' generally got fiercely imbued with the spirit of opposition to British rule. A great part of this transformation was

due to the tactless handling of the Sikhs by the British rulers. For example, in the Sikh agitation for the control of their religious places, called the Gurdwara Reform Movement (1920-25), the Government unwisely enough supported the corrupt priests who had treated the shrines as their personal property and who were known to lead some of them, anyway—disreputable lives. The Government, in pursuance of its policy of supporting certain privileged sections, allowed the masses to drift into an attitude of fierce hostility to itself. In the course of this movement for reform of the shrines, birth-place of Guru Nanak, Founder of the Sikh faith, got as many as one hundred and twenty-one members of a peaceful band murdered, who sought to enter the shrine, in order no doubt to rescue it from the corrupt control of this priest (Mahant). This vast massacre led to a powerful agitation, which soon took the form of an anti-British campaign under the aegis of the Indian National Congress, just then initiating the Non-Co-operation movement which brought Indians millions into the freedom struggle. The Government continued to suppress the Sikh agitation for the reform of their shrines. Thousands went to prison. Ultimately, in 1925 an Act was made by the Panjab Government, transferring the control of the Sikh Shrines to an autonomous elected body of Sikhs—known popularly as Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee. Thus did the Government, through its short-sighted policies, turn the Sikhs into a strong anti-Government force for fighting British rule in India.

Another development which took place in this

period was the awakening among the subjects of the Indian princes, who were ruling their States in the way of despots. There was comparatively less respect for the rights of the individuals in these States than in the territories directly ruled over by the British. This awakening came fairly early to the Panjab States, whose rulers were with only one exception, Sikh. So was the overwhelming majority of the subjects of these States—Patiala, which was the largest and Nabha, Jind, Kapurthala and others. The subject of this biographical sketch, Sardar Sewa Singh Thikriwala, found his life's work and the way to martyrdom in the cause of securing human rights for the subjects of these Panjab States, particularly the one of which he was a subject, Patiala.

ABOUT THE MAN SEWA SINGH

Thikriwala, the birth-place of the subject of this sketch, is a village situated about three miles from the town of Barnala, the original seat of the founder of the ruling House of Patiala. In the eighteenth century, at the time when the Sikh class, called Misl, were waging a life-and-death struggle for freedom from Mughal tyranny in the Panjab, this village was the scene of some historic incidents and already the cradle of heroes. It was here that Baba Ala Singh, founder of the ruling House of Patiala, got his initiation into the Sikh faith at the hands of the leader of the Khalsa confederacy, Nawab Kapur Singh. Sardar Sewa Singh came of a prominent family of this place, which retained its importance in the Patiala State from 1765 onwards

when that State got launched into history as an important political factor in the Panjab region of India. Sardar Sewa Singh appears to have been born in 1882.

The family possessed considerable landed estates. Sardar Sewa Singh got his early schooling at Patiala, and acquired a good knowledge of Urdu and Persian, besides some English. When still in his teens, he was taken as an aide to Maharaj Rajendra Singh of Patiala. This appointment got terminated after the death of the Maharaja in 1900. But soon after he was given some civil appointments in which he proved to be highly competent and imbued with the genuine spirit of public service. As officer for the eradication of the plague, his prompt help saved many lives. He did not, however, remain long in the State service, retiring soon after to his home village. Here he engaged himself in serving and leading the people of his area. He was of a deeply religious temperament and helped bring to his people the new reformed ideas of the Sikh Religious Revival, known as the Singh Sabha Movement. Not only did this introduce the distinctive Sikh ideas of worship among the people, but effected much-needed reform also in the wastefully expensive ceremonies such as those connected with weddings which used to prove ruinous to most people. The people were warned against the harmful effects of liquor. His attitude towards the tenants on his land was benevolent and humane. He returned mortgaged lands at nominal repayment of interest to the owners. This work, which occupied the years of his maturity, made him highly popular and loved among the masses.

In 1913, the new Maharaja, Bhupendra Singh appointed him to the post of Plague Officer and Zaildar (revenue factor and notable) of the area. He accepted, after some hesitation, and rendered devoted service to the people in these official capacities.

Around 1917, certain shady intrigues at the court of Maharaja Bhupendra Singh touched some close relatives of Sardar Sewa Singh. Although he was unconnected with court life, in the atmosphere of suspicion under the highly personal rule of the Maharaja, Sardar Sewa Singh too came under same kind of his displeasure. Soon after occurred several stirring public events, particularly the 1919 massacre in the Jallianwala Bagh at Amritsar and later, the brutal murder of one hundred and twenty-one Sikh devotees at Nankana Sahib, birth-place of Guru Nanak already mentioned. These events deeply moved Sardar Sewa Singh, who was now a private-individual, with a fervently religious and patriotic spirit. The British Government in the Panjab was at this time following a policy of repression; and particularly with regard to the Sikh Movement for the reform of their religious places, took the side of the hereditary priests, who were behaving as a corrupt priesthood on fat unearned incomes from these shrines. Sardar Sewa Singh, stirred and moved by the sufferings of his coreligionists, entered with a large number of people into the struggle, which naturally turned the Maharaja, pledged to loyalty to the British Crown, hostile to Sardar Sewa Singh. This development occurred in 1922.

CONFLICT IN THE PATIALA STATE

This period (1922) was one of great stir and patriotic activity for the Sikhs no less than for the Indian people as a whole. Close to the home village of Sardar Sewa Singh, in the Patiala State occurred an event at this time which drew him immediately into vortex of public action and brought on him his first imprisonment for a popular cause. The Patiala State Police spread terror in the country-side around Thikri-wala village, leading to widespread anger among the people. Sardar Sewa Singh had a little earlier collected sums of money for aid to the families of those who had laid down their lives in the murderous attack at Nankana Sahib (1921) mentioned earlier. Further, he formed a branch of the Shiromani Akali Dal, militant religious political organisation of the Sikhs and applied to the Central body at Amritsar for its affiliation. Not only was this local branch granted affiliation, but the leader, Sardar Sewa Singh was elected Executive Member and a Vice-President of the central body. Around this time also an agitation was started to get the sacred Sikh Shrine at Muktsar in the Panjab freed from the control of the hereditary priests, who naturally resisted. Sardar Sewa Singh, however, who had been put in charge of the campaign, brought about an amicable settlement of the dispute, thus averting what could have been another tragedy.

Still more stirring things happened after this. The Maharaja of Nabha, a neighbour and collateral of the Maharaja of Patiala was deposed by the British Govern-

Patiala for his release, but it became clear that the Maharaja most arbitrarily and despotically was determined to keep in jail a politically inconvenient person. In addition, large numbers of Akali leaders who were agitating against the Maharaja's despotism were put in jail. Some others had their property confiscated and ordered to be deported from the State territory.

The agitation for the release of Sardar Sewa Singh from detention was intensified, and top leaders of the Shiromani Akali Dal urged the Maharaja to release him. But all to no avail. The daily organ of the Akali Dal, *Akali Te Pardesi* of Amritsar wrote a strongly worded editorial on the totally illegal and indefensible incarceration of Sardar Sewa Singh. Public gatherings were held within the Patiala State territory to demand his release. This only led to further repression by the Maharaja's officials, and a reign of terror was let loose on those who showed any manner of sympathy either for Sardar Sewa Singh or for the efforts to secure his release. Furthermore, the State authorities were able, as may easily be imagined, to divide the Akali Dal ranks, by methods of graft. The issue of Sardar Sewa Singh's release became in a way the common demand of the Sikh people, and was resisted by the State Government of Patiala and its neighbours Nabha and Jind in concert. This latter step was a kind of counter-action on the part of the entrenched princely administrations to safeguard their arbitrary authority against any kind of popular agitation.

The Maharaja, in a press statement dated the 6th

February 1929 justified the detention of Sardar Sewa Singh not only by asserting that he was intransigent in defiance despite his being a subject of the Maharaja, but also hinting that those seeking his release were revolutionaries and communists. This last was a sop to the British Government, which would naturally frown on all such tendencies. The Maharaja, after this false accusation, threw a sop to the Akalis by praising their devotion to the Sikh faith. In essence, the Maharaja implied that he would release Sardar Sewa Singh only if he cut off his affiliations with the agitators outside the Patiala State. This would imply that he practically give up his political stance, and behave as a tame, innocuous kind of stooge of the Maharaja.

In the mean-time, besides the dissensions induced among the Akalis, there was a spanner thrown across the efforts for release by a resolution of the All India Congress Committee, giving a handsome clean chit to the Maharaja. The motivation of this appears to be complex. It may have been that the Congress wished to avoid involvement with the Princes at a time when its hands were full with its struggle against the British Government. But may be other influences also played—particularly the approach to the Muslim President of the Congress Dr. Ansari, by the machiavellian Muslim Minister of Patiala, Mir Maqbool Mahmud, who negotiated on behalf of Patiala, which now had a powerful Muslim Prime Minister, Sir Liaquat Hayat Khan. This white-washing chit of the Congress did not satisfy the Sikh people. But dissensions and graft were at this time weakening the Akali ranks, and the efforts to get

his release became feeble and ineffectual.

This failure of the agitation brought on Sardar Sewa Singh severe repression of the authorities, while in jail. Besides political workers, Sardar Sewa Singh's relations also were ill-treated. This led him to go on hunger-strike in jail—the last weapon of those rendered helpless before overwhelming arrogant power. Lack of sustenance weakened his lungs. Other political prisoners went on sympathetic hunger-strike. Forcible feeding was resorted to in jail. There was complete black-out of news from inside jail, and rumour sometimes spread of his death. No one from outside was allowed to meet him. There was a constant fear that the mortal frame would give way. A wave of hate spread among the Sikhs against the tyranny of the Maharaja. It had been known that Sardar Sewa Singh had been forced in jail to swallow food containing an excess of salt, which had impaired his digestive system. Prayers were held all over the Sikh world for his safety and success in his ordeal. It got further known that in protest against his ill-treatment he had refused to wear any clothes except an under-garment only.

'Moderate' sections of the Sikhs, in order to demonstrate their own importance in the affairs of the community continued efforts for his release. After passing through untold physical hardships in jail with the utmost forbearance, he was released grudgingly by the Maharaja on the 24th August, 1929. Another forty-five political workers of Sardar Sewa Singh's group were released at the same time. The releases were so timed as to stall a powerful agitation by the more militant

section among the Sikhs, who had declared their resolve to agitate powerfully against the detentions. Sardar Sewa Singh had been in detention now for six years, and had undergone such hardships as would break the resistance of a weaker soul. In the Patiala State, which he toured over, vast gatherings were held to honour him and to celebrate his heroic effort at fighting the Maharaja's despotism. Here and there, stooges of the Maharaja tried to disrupt these gatherings, but such efforts were foiled with well-deserved contempt. Sardar Sewa Singh's example and his public utterances awakened among the people the spirit of freedom, and sowed the seed of opposition to despotic feudalism.

PRAJA MANDAL—A NEW FORCE

Sardar Sewa Singh was a deeply religious-minded person, and that aspect particularly of the teachings of the Sikh faith which induced heroism and resistance to tyranny in the days of Mughal rule, was a fixed principle of faith with him. The spirit of the Sikh heroes of old was alive in him; and it sustained him in his trials and moved him again and again to rise in revolt against the tyranny in his own day—first against the unwarranted interference by the British rulers in the religious affairs of the Sikh people, from 1921 onwards, and later against the despotic rule of the Maharaja of Patiala. Despite the fight which was forced on him, Sardar Sewa Singh was essentially a loyal subject, holding the noblest convictions of a good man and a good citizen and no way given to disruptive and destructive activity for its own sake. It was only when the ways of autocracy left no scope for him to live in peace with honour that he

offered himself for sacrifice and suffering. It was as a result of the struggle of which he became the central figure that a number of forces, democratic and progressive in character, were awakened among the subjects of the princely States of the Panjab, perhaps beyond the clearly formulated intent and calculation of Sardar Sewa Singh and his associates. While the condition of the people was bad enough in those parts of India directly under British rule, in the princely States things were unspeakably worse. The subjects of the States were forced to bear a number of exactions of the rulers and their minions. There were large hunting excursions, ruining crops and levying various unjustified contributions. Forced labour, unpaid or underpaid was exacted—in this women were not spared, and their honour often was not safe. The tenant-farmers were groaning under heavy burdens. The discontent against such tyranny, long kept mute, now arose with force, and became a movement.

An organization, confined to carrying on the struggle against the Indian princes was formed, of which Sardar Sewa Singh soon after became the inevitable popular leader. This was the Praja Mandal. Its activities spread soon after, so that subjects of the various States of the Panjab and the adjoining hill areas sent their representatives to it. In February 1928, while Sardar Sewa Singh was still in detention, he was elected its President in absentia. Since the activities of this organization could not be carried on from within one of the States, it functioned for the time being from Amritsar.

Among the demands of the Praja Mandal were such important items of the people's welfare as these :

(a) Abolition of *Nazul*, which was an iniquitous law forfeiting the land of a person if he died intestate, in the absence of male issue; (b) Prohibition of hunting excursions over sown land; (c) Abolition of forced labour; (d) Fixing of the betterment levy on land at the same rates as in British India, where it was lower; (e) Repayment of war loans; (f) Abolition of certain unjustified levies on land; (g) Opening of more schools and building more roads; (h) Making equitable tenancy laws; (i) Cancellation of penalties and forfeitures imposed on those who participated in the recent Akali Movement; (j) Reduction of the rulers Privy Purses, (k) Granting freedom of association and the press; (l) Better classification for political prisoners; (m) Permission to interview prisoners on application on plain paper instead of on a duty-paid stamp paper; (n) Payment of compensation for land acquired for roads and canals etc. It eloquently speaks for the utterly miserable condition of the people that agitation involving heavy penalties had to be resorted to, to secure such plain and fundamental rights.

DEMAND FOR ENQUIRY AGAINST THE MAHARAJA

Around this time, the Praja Mandal presented a Memorial to the Viceroy, containing grave charges against the Maharaja of Patiala. In view of the nature of the charges, the All-India States People's Conference on the 11th August 1929 appointed an Enquiry Committee on its own to go into these charges. Shri

C.Y. Chintamani, a well-known lawyer and journalist was nominated Chairman of this Committee. This Committee conducted its Enquiry during December 1929. A large number of witnesses deposed as to the truth of the charges. Among the charges which were then repeated were conspiracy by the Maharaja to get one Lal Singh murdered, and the setting up of a bomb factory in the fort of Bahadurgarh near Patiala, to entrap certain persons. Affairs about women were involved, who were carried away to the Maharaja's harem by means criminal. Charges of harassment of innocent people, forced labour and repression on a large scale were repeated. The Committee, in its Report after Enquiry, stated that the charges contained in the People's Memorial against the Maharaja were substantial, and conscience and decency required that these be enquired into. This Report had a highly perturbing effect on the bureaucracy and even the Viceroy was forced to appoint an Enquiry Committee on his side.

Sardar Sewa Singh who was freed in July 1929, was elected to lead a Jatha of 500 workers of the Praja Mandal to the States People's Conference which was scheduled to meet at Lahore in January 1930. He also sponsored at this time an Urdu Weekly, *Riyasti Duntya*, to express the grievances and demands of the people of the princely States.

The All-India States People's Conference brought out, after its Enquiry, a brochure entitled *Indictment of Patiala*. As a result of this document, which created a stir all over the country, the Government of India

ordered a one-man 'Confidential' Enquiry to be conducted by the Agent to the Governor-General for the Panjab States, Mr. J.A.O. Fitzpatrick. This 'Enquiry' was expected to be a 'white-washing' affair. The Praja Mandal boycotted it, and the States People's Conference expressed its lack of confidence in the intentions of this Enquiry. As expected Mr. Fitzpatrick gave his verdict cleaning the Maharaja, and the Government of India Gazetted on August 4, 1930 its acceptance thereof.

The people, finding the attitude of the Paramount Power, as the British Government was known in relation to the princely States, hardened against the popular movement, resolved to make more sacrifices to secure justice for their cause. Sardar Sewa Singh, who was beyond doubt the Central figure in the affairs of the Panjab States' people, devoted his entire time and energy to this cause, to the exclusion of all other pre-occupations. Conferences were held, and gatherings addressed. In the April of 1930 a deputation was formed to meet the Viceroy, with the demands of the people against the Maharaja of Patiala.

BACK TO PRISON IN PATIALA (NOVEMBER 1930—MARCH 1931)

An important but related assignment which Sardar Sewa Singh took upon himself at this time was to fight the cause of the land-tenants of the State of Patiala, who were a greatly oppressed class. A deputation was taken to Lahore in this connection, conferences were organised and a vast deputation of 1000 Kisans (tenants) was got ready to march to Delhi to present their grievances to the leaders at the Centre. The

movement was made equally active in the neighbouring princely States of Malerkotla and Nabha. The Annual Conference of the Praja Mandal was held at Ludhiana in the Panjab, in October 1930, of which Sardar Sewa Singh was Chairman of the Reception Committee. In his address to the Conference he drew pointed attention in emphatic language to the sufferings of the subjects of the crimes of the ruling coterie, extending to murder and forcible abduction of women. He traced the history of the agitation against the Patiala Maharaja upto the episode of the Fitzpatrick enquiry, and the determination of the State people to carry on their agitation in view of the 'white-washing' Report made by the Enquiry Officer.

On return to the Patiala State territory, Sardar Sewa Singh was arrested for carrying on agitation against the State administration. In a rigged trial he was awarded ten years in jail and a fine of ten thousand rupees atrocious sentence. On appeal to the State High Court, these sentences were halved. Driven to desperation, the Praja Mandal presented another Memorial to the Viceroy, reiterating the charges of tyranny, conspiracy and maladministration against the Maharaja of Patiala. It was, of course, not expected that the British Government would take any action against their favourite, the Maharaja.

In October 1930, the Maharaja left for London to participate in the Round Table Conference for a settlement between the British Government and the Indian political parties. The Praja Mandal workers

greeted the Maharaja with black flags, as a mark of their protest against his acts of high-handedness. While in England, it appears the Maharaja felt it politic to make up with the Praja Mandal. In March 1931 as a result of a pact, while the Praja Mandal agreed to suspend its agitation, the Maharaja set free the political prisoners, including Sardar Sewa Singh. It was also agreed that major demands of the Praja Mandal would be met. The Maharaja, however, wanted only to gain time and to extricate himself from an ugly situation. The Praja Mandal demand of setting up a representative assembly, presented by Sardar Sewa Singh was turned down, and the door to further negotiations was barred.

This led naturally to a renewal of the agitation. An Akali conference at Dhuri in the Patiala State was disrupted by police agents. There was a melee, as a result of which a large number of Akali workers were arrested (June, 1931). As before, political leaders were badly treated in jail, in protest against which many went on hunger strike. Sardar Sewa Singh was not yet put under arrest.

The third Praja Mandal Annual Conference was convened at Simla. The Patiala State authorities attempted to disrupt this also. A high officer of the Panjab Government was directing this disruptive activity. Initially the conspiracy succeeded and the first session ended in confusion, but the Conference re-assembled at the same place in the afternoon. Mahatma Gandhi, who heard of this, evidently took up the matter with the Government of India, as a result of which those officers with whose collusion the disruption had been engineered were censured or punished. This was

no doubt a victory for the Praja Mandal. This was followed up by a resolution of the Subjects Committee of the Praja Mandal, demanding deposition of the Patiala Maharaja. The All-India States People's Conference had passed a similar resolution.

A side-episode was the agitation in Jind State, a principality near Patiala. Here for a long-suffering public Sardar Sewa Singh launched an agitation. He was arrested along with many others. At last, in January 1932 all were released, and their demands were substantially met.

Sardar Sewa Singh during this period (January-June 1932) was, as before, busy organising public conferences to urge the grant of civil rights to the people, particularly of Patiala State. A fresh, comprehensive Memorial was prepared under his guidance by the Praja Mandal to be submitted to the Viceroy, calling for justice against the Patiala Maharaja. The Memorial, while recalling the earlier Memorial and the Fitzpatrick Enquiry, detailed the atrocities of the Maharaja's government on the State's subjects, and the vast suppression of all kinds of liberties, along with the extortions permitted by the State revenue laws. The gulf now between Sardar Sewa Singh and the Maharaja of Patiala was wide and unbridgeable. There was little chance that the British Government would move against the Maharaja, their strong favourite. The Maharaja was bursting with the desire for vengeance against a subject, whom he knew he could not cajole or buy or bend. So apparently, all was set for the final stage in which Sardar Sewa Singh met his heroic end in the Maharaja's prison.

In the meantime, he led an agitation in the neighbouring State of Malerkotla, where he was imprisoned for three months. Such happenings, however, were side episodes in a career which was devoted to a vast enterprise of liberation, and whose uninterrupted course was now shaping. This included campaigning against social evils; such as untouchability, besides the more purely political work.

LAST IMPRISONMENT AND MARTYR'S DEATH

The fourth Praja Mandal Conference of the people of Panjab States was held at Delhi in March, 1933 presided over by Swami Ramananda Sanyasi. This Conference brought into clear light the atrocities in the States, particularly Patiala, and demanded a thorough Enquiry. The Conference was followed about three months after by a leaders' meeting at Amritsar in which it was decided to intensify the agitation against the Patiala administration. This led to retaliatory steps by the Panjab Government and the Maharaja of Patiala. Sardar Sewa Singh was served with a notice to quit Amritsar immediately. The Patiala Maharaja set up a body of stooges parallel to the Praja Mandal. But this was soon dissolved, for fear that by such a step, the agitation would further spread. Sardar Sewa Singh was, in these days, intensely busy with his political work, and in a bid to stop this he was arrested by the Patiala State authorities on August 24, 1933. His attitude to the committal proceedings was one of complete non-cooperation, as he knew that he could expect no fair trial from the judiciary of the Patiala State, which was under orders to convict him heavily. The charges against him were based upon an order called the

'Hidayat' of the Bikrami year 1988 (1931 A. D.) banning all kinds of political activity. Heavy sentences aggregating to six and a half year's hard labour in jail and a fine of Rs. 2000 were imposed. He was transferred from the District Jail of Barnala to the Central Jail at Patiala.

In prison he was put to all kinds of physical hardships. He was put in solitary confinement. No visitors were allowed. The food given to him was sub-human, containing sand and pebbles. To his protest, most inhuman and arrogant answers were made by the jail staff. He was not even allowed to receive any letters from outside. Extremely bad food made him very ill. On a message the jail doctor did not turn up. No medicine was administered either. Even when his illness became serious, no treatment was given. The jail staff openly jeered at him. Finding himself helpless against the tyrannical treatment to which he was subjected he resorted to hunger-strike. The entire prison population went on sympathetic hunger-strike, at which the prisoners were lathi-charged. When they entered their cells for fear of further beating, they were sprayed with boiling hot water, and were later shut up in cells.

In June 1934, rumour spread that Sardar Sewa Singh had died while in detention. This was contradicted by the State authorities, though by now the public had learnt to view such statements with deep scepticism. His relations were turned away most heartlessly when they came to see him. His weight had been reduced by 88 lbs. owing to his prolonged hunger-strike. Forcible feeding had been resorted to, but it did not help. When at last his wife and another relation

were permitted to see him, they found him gone extremely weak, with his eyesight greatly deteriorated, and his cell provided with less than the barest shabby necessities. He indicated whatever he had to say by signs, as he found it difficult even to speak because of great weakness.

Efforts were continued by his relations and the political organisations which he had served, to secure his release. All these proved fruitless. Once again his wife was brought to see him, by a ruse played by the State authorities, to influence him to give up his hunger-strike. This he refused to do. The hunger-strike continued, with extremely harmful effects on his health. In the third week of January, 1935 his condition became critical. He was removed to the Civil Hospital, where medical attention was given to him. But by now his condition was beyond human remedy. At last, on the midnight of January 20, 1935 he passed away. Thus came the heroic end of a courageous and intrepid freedom fighter, who refused to compromise his honour in his fight for bare human rights for his fellow-citizens.

The State authorities issued absurdly misleading statements about the cause of his death, seeking to whitewash their own conduct and responsibility. He was cremated with indecent haste without even allowing his near relations to have a sight of him, so that there should be no public demonstrations. Later, his ashes were refused to be handed over to his relatives for immersion at some sacred place, as is the religious custom. When, ten days after, religious gathering was held in his village to pray for his soul, very few people came to attend it, for fear of harassment by the State

authorities. Thus were the Maharaja and his Government carrying persecution and malice to limits where it is difficult to suppress feelings of deep indignation and contempt.

AFTERMATH TO THE MARTYRDOM

There was a strong indignation among the people at the inhuman treatment meted out to Sardar Sewa Singh in prison, which led to his death. The States Peoples' Conference held an Enquiry into the public allegation that he had been poisoned while in jail. This Enquiry Committee arrived at the conclusion that he had been the victim of wanton and needless persecution. His demands in jail were of a simple character, and any government which had humanitarian considerations, should have conceded them. There was indignation also against the Shiromani Akali Dal, led then by Master Tara Singh, for letting down Sardar Sewa Singh in its anxiety to make up with the Maharaja of Patiala. Out of this feeling was born the Malwa Akali Dal, which claimed to represent the Sikhs of the Malwa region, particularly the people of the princely States of the Panjab.

Maharaja Bhupendra Singh dying in 1938, his successor, Maharaja Yadavendra Singh reversed his father's policy in respect of the Akali leadership. He made up with the family of Sardar Sewa Singh by handing over to them with due respect and ceremony his ashes, which had been lying in the State custody all these days. This helped to assuage feelings. Furthermore, the new Maharaja entered into a marriage alliance with Sardar Harchand Singh Jeji, a close relation of Sardar

Sewa Singh. Sardar Sewa Singh's ashes were immersed according to Sikh rites at the holy spot of Kiratpur. The Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee, representative religious organization of the Sikhs, associated itself to honour these relics.

A fund was established to perpetuate the memory of Sardar Sewa Singh for his services to the people. Some headway was made with the collection of the fund, but owing to various other public distractions, this task remained incomplete. Ultimately, a monument in the form of his statue was set up at a very prominent spot in the city of Patiala, for whose people's liberation from despotism Sardar Sewa Singh had laid down his life.

Thus had ended the career of this sincere, modest and selfless man, whom no kind of force could deflect from the ideal which he had set before himself. Without high education, he had in his soul the fire of idealism and a deeply religious spirit. Truly has he been styled by the people whom he served as Malav-Mukut—the Crown or Glory of the Malwa Region of the Panjab.



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Handwritten text in Voynich script, likely from the Voynich manuscript. The page is numbered '10' in the top right corner. The text is arranged in several lines, with some words appearing to be in a different script or dialect than others, possibly indicating a mix of languages or a specific dialect. The handwriting is in dark ink on aged, slightly discolored paper.